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Tillaroo from Jacaranda

Falling in love was never part of her plan...

PROLOGUE

Rose Jones lifted her dark sunglasses to the top of her head, took a shaky breath and braved a glance left and right. All around her, the pews of the church were packed with mourners, from near and far. Her beautiful great-grandmother had touched many hearts over the years. Elizabeth Jones was going to be deeply missed.

Bringing her attention from where her stepfather, Heath, had his arm wrapped tightly around her grieving mother, Rose looked to the mahogany casket adorned with flowers through tear-blurred eyes. She jumped as her father, Mark, placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Swivelling in her seat, she graced him with an appreciative glance over her shoulder. His kind eyes were filled with the same sadness she carried in her heart.

She was grateful for his comfort, especially as the poker-faced man beside her was cold as ice after an argument this morning, and had offered her no support. It showed to Rose how insensitive her fiancé had become. Rose and Finley Cole had been together for years, sharing dreams, fears, goals ... and yet, she felt as if she didn't know him at all anymore. Cracks were appearing in every part of their relationship, but after months of trying to be the only peacekeeper, she just didn't have the energy anymore, and they were sinking, fast.

Watching GG, her great-grandfather, shuffle up to say his final words very nearly had her sobbing uncontrollably. But with her mother squeezing her hand tight, she held it together, just. She also felt consoled in knowing her great-grandmother was no longer suffering from the cancer that had stolen her bright spirit and riddled her body with pain, even if it didn't curb the fathomless anguish of her loss. Never had she thought her heart could break like this; it was as if she could barely draw a breath.

Taking a moment to gather himself, David Jones cleared his throat before leaning into the microphone. 'Elizabeth was the absolute light, and love, of my life. She was a wonderful wife, a devoted mother, a loving great-grandmother and a loyal friend to many. She always believed that love was the greatest of gifts, and we all know how much of it she gave to each and every one of us.' His chin wobbled, and he paused, gripping the lectern tightly. 'Excuse me for a minute.' Closing his eyes, he turned his back to the mourners, his burly shoulders shaking.

Unable to sit back and see her hero in so much pain, Rose shot to her feet, disregarding her wobbly legs, and rushed to his side. 'It's okay, GG. I can finish your speech if you like,' she whispered, rubbing his back.

'Thank you, little one, but I want to try to do this. For her.' Wiping his eyes with a handkerchief, he brought his big hand to her cheek. 'But can you stay here with me, just in case?'

Biting her trembling lip, Rose bit back a sob. 'Of course I can.' In her line of sight, her mum, Molly Jones, offered her an appreciative look.

After a few breaths, her great-grandfather turned back to the sea of mourners, and she slipped an arm around him. Together, somehow, they got through it. As they always had, and always would, no matter what life threw at them. Then, taking his hand in hers, she led him back to his seat, beside her stepfather. Step by step, they had been moving through the motions of death as the tight-knit family they were. Day by day, they now had to find a way to get through their mountains of sorrow. She didn't know how it was going to be possible, but one thing was for certain, she was going to make sure she was there for her family, just as they'd all been loyally by her side throughout her twenty-one years of life.

CHAPTER

1

One month later – Jacaranda Farm

After dumping the grooming bucket onto the timeworn timber workbench, Rose stole a moment to ease out her tight neck. Tossing and turning all night long while she worried herself sick was doing her no favours. She really needed to get back to her yoga and meditation; it would help her to relax and switch off her overactive mind. With the new year only weeks away, maybe that could be her resolution to welcome the next year in? Not that her resolution for this year had come to fruition – with her busy lifestyle, taking better care of herself had proved difficult. Between teaching kids how to ride, meeting her writing deadlines, keeping in touch with family and friends, being a good fiancée/homemaker and the intense training and competition schedule that came with her barrel racing, she barely had time to stop and take a much-needed breath. If only she had the chance to slow down and smell the proverbial roses, just for a little while. Now, wouldn't that be nice?

Pigs might fly too.

Sighing, she looked at the two posters her great-grandmother had made, which Rose had pinned to the tack-shed wall as an eleven-year-old girl. Now faded – even the tacks that held the laminated placards in place were rusting – the posters had been a way to encourage her big dreams of becoming Australia's barrel-racing champion, just like her great-grandmother had once been. She remembered working with GG, hammering each pin into place – her up on the bench with swinging legs, GG with hammer in hand, the next tack held between his teeth.

She quietly read each inspiring quote for the umpteenth time in her life.

'I figure if a girl wants to become a legend, she should just go ahead and be one.'

– Calamity Jane

'Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway.'

– John Wayne

She softly smiled to herself. This kind of encouragement and inspiration was what pushed her through the hard times and lately, she'd had many challenging times. Sure, barrel racing was tough – the hours on the road were gruelling and the injuries could sometimes be excruciating – but it was all worth the blood, sweat and tears. Not that Finley shared her opinion. And to prove the point, he'd stopped showing any interest in her endeavours. Sure, it would never make her a millionaire, but between the prize money, the income from her horse-riding school, occasional jillarooing jobs and the royalties from her barrel-racing guidebooks, she was living comfortably doing something she was passionate about. Yes, she was juggling a few balls, but she always found a way to fit everything in, and to put time aside to spend together as a couple. Although, for the past few months, he didn't seem keen to be in her company. It felt like he was avoiding her.

With a heavy heart, her thoughts drifted back to their argument yesterday. She plucked her mobile from her pocket and re-read the text message he'd sent her last night.

You're going to be my wife in six months' time, Rose, and you know I want a family sooner rather than later. You really need to start looking towards motherhood, which means letting go of your barrel racing and riding school. You can't ride a horse like that when you're pregnant. That would just be stupid, and selfish.

No mention of 'I love you', or 'We will work this out'. Just demands. That had become Finley's way. And she didn't like being told what to do.

Cursing beneath her breath, she gritted her teeth as she shoved the phone back into her jeans pocket. It was a given that she'd never compete while she was pregnant – she'd never dream of endangering her unborn child's life. But wasn't it her choice too, as to when she and Finley had children? She wasn't ready yet. Especially considering she was just shy of twenty-two. Yes, Finley was seven years older, but that gave him no right to pressure her into his timeline – one that she'd known nothing about until recently – and she'd said as much in her reply text to him, to which she'd received no response. Nor had he answered her three calls this morning. Her annoyance rose another notch just thinking about it. Hopefully, when he arrived home tonight, they could have a calm conversation, like the adults they were supposed to be.

You're kidding yourself, Jones. He's never going to listen. You should've learnt that by now.

Rose huffed her voice of reason away. Love was unconditional, uplifting and encouraging ... wasn't it? But since getting engaged five months before, the rose-coloured glasses had tumbled off and been crushed beneath her boots. The position Finley had taken at his father's insurance firm meant many nights away from home, and he was gradually turning into a person she didn't know and, at times, didn't like very much. Not to mention his outdated expectations had thrown her off-kilter, with him transforming suddenly from an easygoing larrikin who laughed a lot to a suit-wearing solemn man who lived to work.

If they could only iron out the matters that were causing their recurring arguments, she truly believed they could be happy again. She wasn't asking much. He wanted four children; she'd be happy with one or two, and she didn't want any for a few more years. He wanted her to stay home, but she didn't want him to be the only breadwinner; she believed in mutual contributions. She didn't believe he needed to know where she was all the time because she was as loyal and trustworthy as a person came, and she thought it was a double standard that he expected her to give him complete freedom to do as he wished, whenever he wanted, without question. It just all seemed a little one-sided, and it was beginning to wear her on patience and optimism.

Heaving another weighty sigh, she tried to shake the contemplations from her mind. There'd be plenty of time for her to mull it all over later, like she'd been doing all week, with Finley away on yet another work trip. Right now, she needed to put one hundred and ten percent focus into her barrel racing. She couldn't risk an injury to herself or Buck, especially when it was so close to the end of the rodeo circuit. She needed top points to walk away Australian barrel-racing champion for the second year running – handing the trophy over to her arch-nemesis would be an utter nightmare. Madeline Hew might have been an excellent rider, but she was a horrid human being, a bad sport and a shocking loser.

Leaning in, Rose placed a hand on her great-grandmother's cursive writing. 'I'm going to make you super proud this weekend, Great-Grandma,' she said quietly, blinking back tears. 'I just wish you were here to watch.' She bit down on her bottom lip to stop from crying. 'But I know you'll be cheering me on from heaven.'

Running at her dreams head-on had been a trait the strong women of her family had taught her – her grandmother, her mum and her aunties. She wasn't about to let go of that, not even for Finley. She just hoped he loved her enough to accept who she truly was.

Taking a breath, she turned and gathered her emotions before stepping from the shade of the leather-scented tack shed. Having made the effort to dress in her competitive gear – it always gave her that extra oomph – she looked every part of the champion barrel racer, with her diamanté-studded jeans, blingy belt, pink and purple checked Western shirt and timeworn Ariat boots.

Hands on hips, her wide-brimmed hat pulled level to her brows and her long brown hair pulled into a tightly plaited ponytail, she narrowed her gaze and looked towards the arena that she'd spent countless hours in over the years. Heath had positioned the three barrels perfectly for her cloverleaf pattern. She adored that he cared enough to know that every second counted.

The terrain underfoot was a little soft after the overnight rain – something to take into consideration. With her trained eye, backed up by a nudge with the toe of her boot, she could tell if an arena was going to be shallow or deep or have a deceptively hard pan underneath which could injure a horse. And even though winning was important, she'd prefer to knock back a race than risk hurting her beloved gelding.

As if sensing her thoughts were on him, Buck turned and whinnied from where he was patiently waiting for their training session to begin. His red chestnut coat glistened beneath the mid-morning

sunshine, and he looked mighty dapper in his new set of splint boots and glittery halter. Shoving her hands into her pockets, Rose forgot about everything that had been weighing her down and smiled from the inside out. Three turns, two hearts and one pair of tightly united souls – that was her and Buck down to a tee. God, how she loved him. In thirteen years, they'd been through so much together and knew each other like only best mates could. He made her laugh with his playful antics, and had taken her on many adventures, while his mane had wiped away many of her tears. She couldn't imagine life without him.

The crunch of gravel under tyres pulled her gaze down the earthy track. Spotting Molly climb from her new LandCruiser Sahara, she instantly felt the familiar peace her mother had always brought into her life.

'Hey, Mum.' Rose gave her a wave as she took steps to close the distance.

'Hi, sweetheart,' Molly hollered back as she ambled towards her with Rose's six-year-old sister, Lizzy, in tow. 'Sorry I'm a little late, but this munchkin was a right Little Miss Grumpy Pants this morning.'

Lizzy glanced up at her mum, her face crumpled with characteristic Miller rebelliousness. 'It was Angus's fault for eating all the peanut butter.'

'Yes, so you've said.' Molly offered a playful glance to Rose. '*Many* times.'

'Wowsers.' Rose had to fight to curb her laughter. She wasn't surprised, given their teenage brother's appetite. 'Sounds serious.' She forced a frown in Lizzy's direction.

'Oh, trust me, Rose, it was almost World War III.' Molly rolled her eyes. 'Thank god Heath came to the rescue with one of those little sachet thingies of peanut butter he gets from the breakfast bar at the mine.'

'Ha, yeah. At least now you'll live to fight another day.' Grinning at her mum's exasperated expression, Rose brushed a kiss on her cheek then bent to do the same to Lizzy. 'You're going to turn into a tub of peanut butter one of these days, my little ferret.'

Lizzy giggled. 'You're so silly, sis.'

'I try to be.' Ruffling Lizzy's platinum blonde ringlets, Rose straightened.

'Right then.' Molly clapped her hands together. 'Let's get this show on the road, shall we? Before it gets too hot to think.'

'Yes.' Rose nodded. 'Let's.'

Though she hadn't carried on in her mother's vein of horse whispering, the love of these magnificent creatures ran deep in her blood. She adored teaching kids to ride, found the thrill of rounding up cattle and wayward bulls addictive, and sharing her wealth of knowledge in her bestselling guidebooks was such a blessing – she wasn't about to put all of that on hold for the life Finley had apparently chosen for her. He was clearly counting on her to be a stay-at-home wife and mother, and although she wanted to make him happy, the thought of being housebound for the next twenty-odd years terrified her. That was where one of her favoured lines from her favourite Nicholas Sparks movie, *The Longest Ride*, about love requiring sacrifice, came into play. If only it was as easily done as said.

Rose couldn't wait to be in the saddle – it's where she lived to be – and she was eager to get into the last training session before the annual Mareeba Christmas Eve Rodeo on the weekend.

Reaching Buck, Rose pecked him on the muzzle. 'Right, my boy. Let's do this.' She vaulted into the saddle. Locking her boot heels into the stirrups, she quickly got settled as she studied the cloverleaf pattern she was about to make around the three barrels. With Buck eyeing the path too, the gelding pushed into the bit as she got him into starting position. His body twitching with anticipation, he snorted and stomped his hoof, ears forward and muscles coiling tightly beneath the saddle. Rose knew every bit of Buck's powerful build was honed and ready – she treasured how he was always as keen as she was to reach the finishing line. It's what made them a team to be reckoned with.

Standing on the bottom rail with her arms resting on the top one, Molly held the stopwatch up. 'You two ready to go, sweetheart?' Her singsong voice carried across the yard.

Rose flashed her a smile. 'Yes.'

'And ... go.'

Rose barely twitched the reins and Buck exploded like a missile fired. Eyes intent on making the sharp turn, they shot towards the first barrel. Dirt flew out from Buck's hooves as he dug down and curved around it. She watched where his feet were going, one powerful stride after the other. Clouded by dust, she maintained her core and kept her hips ground evenly into the saddle as she

cut him tight around the second one. Relaxing her midsection, she encouraged him to shorten his stride as he approached the final one. Like a bolt of lightning, he shot around it, swiftly and smoothly, careful not to tip it. Then, with one last burst of speed, he galloped for the finishing line.

'Wow, Rose.' Molly danced on the spot as she bellowed out, 'Fourteen point two seconds.'

'Woohoo,' Rose exhaled. 'Did you hear that, Buck? We just cut point three seconds off our record.' She gave him a rub for a job well done. 'Yay for us, my clever boy! I reckon we might have this in the bag.'

Buck bobbed his head then whinnied animatedly, enticing a wholehearted giggle from Lizzy.

Finding her little sister's laughter addictive, Rose smiled even wider as she gently pulled Buck to a stop just short of Molly and Lizzy. 'Of course you agree with me, hey buddy? You always do.' She dismounted in one graceful movement and collected a kiss on the cheek from her mum. 'I love you so much, mumma bear. Thank you for everything you do for me. I honestly don't know where I'd be without you.'

'Pfft, don't speak of it.' Waving a hand through the air, Molly smiled like only a mother could towards a daughter. 'I love you to the moon and back, my sweet girl.' She tucked a wisp of hair behind Rose's ear before bringing her hands to her cheeks. 'You're looking a little weary today, love. Make sure you rest up before the weekend, won't you?'

'I'll try to, I promise.' Rose bit back the urge to spill anything about her and Finley's troubled relationship. Her mum had enough emotional baggage to deal with right now.

'Glad to hear it, sweetheart.' Molly held her gaze with eyes the same colour as her own for a moment longer, then looked to Lizzy, who was now drawing circles in the dirt with a stick. 'I best get a move on. I have to get this little one to her dance class at twelve-thirty.'

'Okey-dokey. I'll call you tomorrow.' Rose started to lead Buck towards the stables. 'Bye, Lizzy.'

Lizzy waved enthusiastically. 'Bye, sissy.'

An hour later, Rose was stepping through the doors of her second-favourite shop in Mareeba, the first being the Western clothing store with all its leather goods and sparkly tops. She breathed deeply; she'd always loved the smell of the local feed store, Stockman's Hall of Hay. Striding towards the back of the building, she went in search of golden yolk chicken feed, the secret behind the almost orange hue of the eggs she consumed every morning. Fried, poached, scrambled, the occasional omelette, you name it – eggs were her go-to. Ironic that Finley was allergic.

Turning a corner while lost in her thoughts, she ran smack-bang into a big, burly chest. The owner of said chest instantly grabbed her arm as if to steady her, his hold strong yet gentle, cool but heated. And holy moly, he smelt good – leather and spice and all things horsey nice.

'Oops, sorry about that.' Shamefaced, she stepped back and her heart skipped a beat as she peered up into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen, ones that contrasted with the bloke's shaggy black hair and the equally dark five o'clock shadow that dusted his square jaw.

In a single breath, his gaze raked over her, paused on her lips then back to her eyes. 'Equally guilty for the collision.' Balancing a twenty-kilogram bag of feed on each of his wide shoulders, the towering bloke flashed her an apologetic grin. 'So no worries at all.'

'Oh, okay, cheers.' Remembering to blink, she smiled as she stepped aside to let him pass. And that was when it hit her – she'd just collided with the one and only Ty Parker, champion bull rider. She'd seen him atop a bull quite a few times, but never had she been so up close and personal. By god, his presence was emanating masculinity in spades. For some strange reason, she felt the need to look around and make sure nobody was watching them. She shook herself. What was that all about?

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him walk away quickly, disappearing except for his wide-brimmed hat. She observed it hovering across the store then, after pausing at the cash registers, out the front doors. She knew that he owned a cattle station a few hours west of Townsville, nearer Charters Towers, and that was about it. With one of the biggest rodeos of the calendar on this weekend, he was no doubt here to jump aboard a bucking bull.

Remembering what she'd come in here for, she got back to her list of errands. Even though they were in a hard place right now, she was looking forward to seeing Finley and hoped they could find a way to move past all the drama. Maybe she should cook his favourite of grilled garlic Moreton Bay bugs with a side of her rocket, pear and blue cheese salad. Washed down with a good bottle of wine, of course, to soften the mood. Yeah, that's exactly what she was going to do. The very thought made her steps a little lighter. All she wanted was a happy life with him – surely it couldn't be that hard? She swallowed down another wave of hurt, wishing he'd call her back.

As if on cue, her phone chimed from her pocket. She plucked it out, breathing a sigh of relief when Finley's handsome face lit up her screen. 'Hey you.' She stepped into a quiet aisle, keeping her voice low.

'Hi, Rose.' The line was crackly, distorting his voice a little.

'I was getting worried, seeing as you didn't return any of my calls.'

'Yeah, sorry. I've been flat-out.' Finley's tone was curt and cold.

Not wanting to bite, Rose pushed past her anger and reached inside her heart for the love she felt for him. 'I can't wait to see you tonight.'

'Yeah, about that.' More crackles sounded. 'I'm not going to make it to the airport in time.'

Her heart sank to her scuffed boots. 'Why, what's happened?'

'I've been caught up at a meeting, and I've had to rebook my flight, so I won't be home until tomorrow, around lunchtime.'

Rose almost protested but stopped herself, knowing from experience it would be a waste of her breath, and would only add fuel to their heated fire. 'Oh, okay. Well, it can't be helped, I suppose. I'll see you tomorrow then.'

'Yup.'

'Okay. Well, have a safe flight.' Tears threatened and she blinked faster.

'I will. Bye, Rose.' He hung up before she could even tell him she loved him.

Dropping her phone from her ear, she stood there for a few long moments, trying to gather her emotions. She didn't want to cry – not here, not now. Having spent so much time alone over the past few months, she'd cried rivers over her bumpy relationship with Finley.

On the way home, she pulled into the McDonald's drive-through. With nobody to cook for, a Quarter Pounder and chips washed down with a sugar-free frozen Coke was on the menu. Hell, she might even grab herself an apple pie to munch on later, when she wanted to drown her lonesome sorrows. It would go well with the tub of cookies and cream Connoisseur ice-cream she had stashed in her freezer for just such an occasion.

Twenty minutes later, driving past the sign that read *Cole Estate*, she slowed and turned left. It had taken her a while to get used to her future in-laws' flashy fifty-acre Mareeba property – she'd always envisioned growing old on the unpretentious family property, Jacaranda Farm. But then she'd met Finley on the night of her seventeenth birthday and, after four and a half years of dating, he'd shocked the hell out of her and everyone who knew him by getting down on one knee. She'd moved in with him a few months later.

His parents made their disapproval of their engagement known whenever the chance arose, jibing about everything from the way she chose to dress to how she placed her knife and fork on her plate after eating. They were subtle, but it was passive aggression in its ugliest form. Finley chose to not see what they did to make her feel uncomfortable, and unwelcome, which caused more arguments.

If only she could talk him into returning with her to Jacaranda Farm, where life was peaceful, her family loved unconditionally, and the future seemed bright.

* * *

Rose couldn't believe what she was hearing. She carefully placed her knife and fork down, trying to reel in her anger while death-staring Finley. 'What do you mean, you think we need to take a *break*?'

Sitting opposite her at the dining table, his garlic Moreton Bay bugs barely touched, Finley shrugged. 'I just think it would do us good to, you know, see how we really feel when we're apart, before we go committing our entire lives to each other.'

For goodness sake, he'd been her first date, her first kiss, her first ... *everything*. And now he was worried about commitment?

He pushed his salad around the plate with his fork. 'Maybe we're not as compatible as we first thought we were.'

'Not compatible?' She blinked faster – she was not going to cry. She'd done enough of that, especially since losing her beloved great-grandma. Besides, Finley didn't deserve her precious tears.

He lifted his gaze to hers. 'Come on, Rose. We aren't on the same page about a lot of things. I think all our arguing lately has proven that.'

'Couples are meant to work through their differences, Finley, not just shrug and give up when the going got tough.' Instead of replying, he once again shrugged. It was as if he'd already given up on her, on them. 'I don't understand the sudden change of heart.' She sniffled, blinking away instant tears. 'Has something happened to make you like this?'

'Nothing I can pinpoint. It's just a feeling.' He sat back and folded his arms. 'I honestly don't know if I'm in love with you anymore.'

Shell-shocked, heartbroken and so damn angry, Rose couldn't summon a reply that wasn't filled with expletives so, in the vein of not saying anything if she had nothing nice to say, she remained silent.

As if becoming impatient with her, Finley drew in a breath, held it, then huffed it away. 'I don't think it's a good idea for you to stay here while we figure things out either.'

Rose shot to her feet, tugged off her engagement ring and thumped it on the table. 'Then I'll pack my things and be out of your hair.' She shoved her chair back, and it tumbled as she stormed off down the hallway. Thank god she'd left Buck over at Jacaranda Farm – it meant she didn't have to hitch the trailer and load him before getting the hell out of here.

'Rose.' Finley's voice carried after her. 'I'm sorry.'

After she packed what little she could claim as her own, the drive to her childhood home flashed by in a tear-hazed blur. Her relationship was in tatters, but so was the business she'd put so much time and effort into – her students weren't going to drive the forty-five minutes to Dimbulah for their lessons. And it wasn't like she could move the riding arena she'd had built at Cole Estate to Jacaranda, even if they would. Talk about everything blowing up in her face. At least she still had her writing and jillarooing. Thank goodness.

With her mind all over the place, Rose slammed on the brakes when she almost missed the turn that she'd taken countless times before. The back end of her Holden Colorado fishtailed as she took the corner and her tyres left the bitumen, meeting with loose gravel. Glancing in her rear-view mirror, she was thankful there'd been nobody behind her.

Pulling to the side of the road, she heaved breaths in. Her fingers tightened around the steering wheel as she fought not to shatter. She had to find a way to deal with this. Giving herself a firm pep talk, she pushed the despair down as best as she could and pulled back out, her high-beam headlights making it look as if it were daylight. Heading down the long dirt road, she felt a wave of relief when she turned into the front gates of Jacaranda Farm. Pulling up beneath a towering paperbark, she killed the engine, kicked her door open and jumped out.

Her mum's border collie, Ralph, dashed to her side, his big brown eyes seeming to know she was upset. 'I'll be right, buddy.' She loved the fact he was a pup of Mack and Sasha, who'd been gifted to her as puppies by her great-aunt, Cheryl. It made him all the more special.

Trev and Kenny, who'd worked on the farm as long as she could remember, were sitting on the patio of their workers' cottage – their usual spot for the evening – with beers in hand. They both grinned and waved and she tried to do the same, but with her smile faltering, she quickly turned away. She needed her mum, now.

'Hey, is everything okay, kiddo?' Trev called out to her.

'Not really.' She called over her shoulder. 'But don't worry, I'll be fine, Uncle Trev.'

'We got your back,' Kenny hollered.

'Thanks Kenny,' she shouted back to him, their show of support choking her up even more.

She kicked her boots off at the back door, then strode into the homestead to the cheery chatter of family and the smell of her mum's midweek roast – it had become a tradition over the years to have a roast twice a week, to bring them all together more often. The only reason she hadn't come tonight was so she and Finley could try to sort things out.

She followed the scent down the hallway, past the line-up of family photos, and into what her great-grandmother had always called the heart of the home: the kitchen. Happy conversation halted. Five sets of eyes looked up at her from the table – Mum, Heath, Angus, GG and Lizzy. She didn't need to say anything – they could all tell she was upset, with the tears now pouring down her cheeks.

Molly was the first to her feet. 'Oh, sweetheart, what's happened?' She dashed to her side and took her into her arms. 'Are you okay?'

'No.' Rose clung to her. 'Finley just broke up with me.' The sobs she'd been keeping at bay escaped.

'Oh, sweetheart. I'm so sorry.' Molly hugged her tighter. 'He doesn't know what he's giving up.'

'He's a damn fool,' GG firmly stated. 'Our girl deserves better.'

'Do you want me to go and kick him in the nuts?' Angus groused.

Lizzy gasped. 'Angus, don't talk like that. It's rude.'

'My heart hurts so much, Mum,' she finally said, as she untangled her arms and looked into her mother's kind eyes. 'Even though we were having a bit of a rough time, I thought he and I were going to be forever.'

'Oh, darling, I know you did.' Reaching out, Molly cupped her cheeks. 'Somehow, everything will work out exactly as it's meant to. You'll see.'

Nodding, Rose sucked in a shaky breath. 'I hope you're right, Mum.'

'Your mother is always right, Rosie,' GG said gently. 'She's wise, just like your great-grandma.' Coming to her side, he gave her shoulders a squeeze. 'You're a beautiful young woman, with so much to light and love to give. You deserve great love.'

'Thanks GG,' Rose said, squeezing the words past the emotion lodged in her throat. She appreciated how the menfolk in her life showed their love and support in their own masculine ways – she could only guess how infuriated her father was going to be.

Lizzy clambered from her chair and wrapped her arms around Rose's legs. 'We all love you, sissy,' she said, looking up at her.

'Yes, we do,' echoed Heath, wrapping a comforting arm around her.

Leaning her head against her stepfather's shoulder, Rose couldn't help but smile through her tears. 'Thank you all for loving me like you do.' If only she could one day cross paths with a man who would love her like this lot, she'd be a very happy woman.